

## Shahira Fahmy: Mashrabiya magic



The mashrabiya coffee table by Shahira Fahmy is displayed with a chair by Patricia Urquiola for Moroso. (Photo by Heba Elkayal)

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Once used to ventilate houses and hide women from strangers outside, the mashrabiya wooden lattice work is today played with by architect and product designer Shahira Fahmy, revealing a new use for the exquisite craftsmanship of the woodwork so particular to Egypt.

Her contribution to the +20 exhibit at Beyt El-Suhaymi is a glass topped coffee table of a multiple footed mashrabiya base that fans out like a spiral bound notebook. It is her ingenious take on an abundantly used local craft, which — in her words — is produced by the skilled hands of craftsmen "as if they were machines."

Her table is practical, functional and easily stackable once the mood strikes you for a change in surroundings.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and Fahmy designed this table between 2006 and 2007 when she was selected to participate in the Salone Satellite during the Milan Furniture Fair that takes place each April. She was forced to come up with a new design upon submitting a portfolio of her work.

"I had four months to do something and be in Milan. The biggest challenge was production; I didn't have time on my side so production was my main concern. I decided to do something with mashrabiya because this material people here know and already do well.

"I thought this material should be used for something different than windows and chairs because you have something...that everyone knows how to do and they produce it so quickly. And you have a wide array of mashrabiya so I went to workshops to study every kind of mashrabiya, every scale, and every type. You have different functionalities: some are very rigid, some are very flexible."

She had designed a bookshelf that one can assemble according to their filing needs of coffee books or smaller novels, playing with the width and height of the shelving in between.

"As an architect, the notion of grids is important," she said. It is often the starting point of inspiration for Fahmy who breaks her designs down to their most basic lines, playing with the flexibility rendered by a basic component of design.

"For me the goal was that the mashrabiya was going to give me flexibility which meant that I know how to do many things with it — and for me it was storage and folding. It was important that I can do that because everything around me in Milan was all about how you can take it out from somewhere and fold it out or fold it flat. And so I thought that everything was designed with that concept in mind, that you can store it after you're done."

Fahmy has her ambitions set on further exploring designs with the mashrabiya as the basic building component.

"The difference between us and Milan is their ability to execute ideas, but we have something here that they don't have, including copper and metalwork, so at least we're starting with this," Fahmy said.

**Shahira H. Fahmy Architects**  
15 Wady El-Nil St.,  
Mohandessin, Giza  
Tel: (02) 3305 3528  
www.sfhahmy.com



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